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ABSTRACT

As part of a larger research study, three freshman writers were observed in order to determine when they rewrote compositions, when they rethought major concepts and designs, and when they reviewed stylistic options and made purposive as opposed to uninformed changes in their writing. Their tape recorded comments were guided by questions on (1) how the writer decided on a topic, (2) whether it was the first one considered, (3) whether the writer spent a great deal of time thinking before writing, (4) if the writer took preliminary notes or spoke with anyone, (5) whether the writer wrote the paper straight through, (6) how the peer group reacted, (7) the writer's reaction to the teacher's comments, (8) whether the writer was satisfied with the piece or if he or she wanted to revise it further, and (9) whether the writer's original intention changed from beginning to end. Students were asked to tape record their feelings before beginning to write, during break times and after completing drafts, after peer group interchanges, before and after the second draft, before and after teacher comments, and at the completion of the writing task. The recorded comments illustrated the recursive shaping and revising, motivations for revisions, and the discovery of intentions in the writing process. (HOD)

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CCCC Speech
Dallas, March 27, 1981

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The Composing Processes of Three College Freshmen: Focus on Revision

The Composing Processes of Three College Freshmen: Focus on Revision is the title of my nearly-completed dissertation--a case study of three freshman writers--Lisa, Paul and Robert--writers who were my students during the fall semester of 1979. Rather than offering a summary, this afternoon I'd like to describe my methodology, give a sense of its "case study" aspect, dramatize revision-in-process, and, finally, draw some conclusions as to when writers revise. On the handout, you'll notice the six guiding questions of my study. Today I'll be focusing on the third question, on when writers revise--when they re-see major concepts and designs, when they re-see stylistic options and make purposive as opposed to uninformed changes in their writing. On one level, I'll be talking about the "placement" of these revisions within the entire composing process. On another level, I'll be suggesting the environment, the entire context, that leads students to accept the written word as tentative and allows them to feel safe to experiment with change.

My own interest in revision was kindled several years ago when I was engrossed in manuscript studies of the composing processes of fiction writers. These studies dramatized quite convincingly that writing is rewriting, that revision is a process that continues from the inception of an idea to the final copy. At the time I designed my case study of student writers, researchers were already finding that the composing

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process for college writers was somewhat more limited. In fact, Nancy Sommers found that the college freshmen she studied for the most part confined themselves to changing words and phrases. Why this great discrepancy? It wasn't just age--as Donald Graves and his research team have been documenting, elementary school children do reconsider and rewrite stories successfully--given a supportive workshop setting. And at last year's 4C's, Mimi Schwartz--after studying writers as disparate as a professional poet composing poems and an eleven year old boy composing narrative--reported that the similarities in their processes were more striking than the differences. However, she was studying self-sponsored writing: according to Schwartz, it was the commitment to the piece the writers had initiated and the unlimited time they allowed themselves to complete it that accounted for the similarities.

It is important to know that young people writing outside of school behave more like professional writers. I was interested, however, in how young people might write inside the school parameters. What I wanted was a research design that would encourage college writers--who have little time for anything but school-sponsored writing--to write as well as possible. Drawing on recent research in composition, I decided that:

1. the classroom would have a workshop atmosphere
2. students would have leeway in terms of topic selection
3. students would write in drafts
4. students would have help from both peer groups and teacher commenting

5. students would have a teacher who was not so much examiner-evaluator as a concerned reader and editor
6. students would have the opportunity to compose where they wished

The writing program already in place at New York University served my purposes well. All freshman writing classes shared the 3-draft process. After pre-writing discussions, students wrote the first draft of a paper at home and brought it to class to share with a peer writing group. The writers read their papers aloud. Then peers responded, letting the author know what was particularly good, what needed clarifying. The writers revised their papers at home. The teacher responded in writing to draft 2. Then the students were ready to write their third and final draft, a typed "press perfect" version.

On the first page of the handout, I list the combined pedagogy and research design. I wanted to have access to as much of the composing process as possible--from the students' initial grappling with the writing task to their thoughts on the finished product. Drawing on the composing aloud model, I devised the technique of reporting-in. (The instructions I gave my students are on the second page of the handout.)

Lisa, Paul and Robert talked into a tape recorder about their plans, intentions, feelings before they began drafting. Then, during the drafting, when they came to natural "resting places," times when they would have taken a break anyway, they reported-in again--their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the paper so far, how they thought

they would proceed. They also reported-in before they began their third draft--first reading my comments aloud and responding to them, then making additional comments about their plans for the final version. As you'll note on the "P.S.," I encouraged the students to be chatty, to feel free to go off on tangents.

The kinds of information I got from these tapes varied from person to person and from task to task. Usually, the tapes revealed quite a bit about the students' attitudes toward writing and revising in general, and toward the particular writing task.

I'd like to play a brief piece of Lisa's reporting-in tape for her sixth and last paper--a research paper which she decided to do on "guilt." A few introductory remarks: Of the three students, Lisa was the most consistently "successful" one. From the first day, she was ready to experiment and willing to listen--both to what others suggested about her writing and to her own sense of what she wanted to say. While she was moderately troubled about not knowing what "the teacher" wanted for her first college paper, she quickly accepted the notion that I "wanted" what she "intended," that I wanted her to discover and shape an important piece of writing within the fairly loose constraints of the assigned writing task. From the beginning, Lisa pressed to make these tasks her own. Although she considered it more difficult to shape her own topic, she preferred this more difficult "freedom" to the safer teacher-specified topics she was more familiar with. On the tape, you'll notice:

--her excitement about the topic

--her understanding that she's tackling what is for her a difficult task

--her ease with having an "overabundance" of facts

--her conscious planning and her spontaneous revising

--her concern with audience

--her accepting the notion of tentative drafting

Here's Lisa. The day before, she had just changed her topic from teenage suicide to guilt. Before she began reading, she had no idea what aspect of her topic she would explore. The tape starts with Lisa in the midst of reading and note taking and ends a few minutes before she begins drafting.

(ON TAPE)

I haven't actually begun writing the paper. What I'm doing is taking notes. Writing down comparisons, similarities which I'm not mapping out, but I know are there on all these notes. I'm really into writing about guilt. Remember, I switched it, and not only that, what really makes it good is that I found one sentence about teenage suicide so it doesn't make me feel so quote unquote "guilty" about not writing about teenage suicide like I said I would. Part of my problem may be that I'm so wrapped up in it, and so determined to write something that not only I'm going to be turning in for English, but something that means I comprehened these three books that I've read, because psychology is my field--that I'm not quite

sure if I'm going to be organized enough to get it together for anybody else but me. I've got this overabundance of facts which I'm so excited about having, that I'm not really thinking about putting it into a paper.

And also what I'm looking for is a good solid example that doesn't take six pages and isn't your "Bobbie K went to the store and forgot his wallet." I don't like those, I can't stand reading those. I'm really trying to think of a good case, a good instance which--I just don't want to open my paper with that. Everyone does it. It's too redundant.

Well, these are just my thoughts on the paper, before I've started writing it. I'm just anticipating problems. We'll see what happens.

Hello, Faye, I'm back to reporting-in. I'm about to begin writing. I thought of a good opening for the paper. I think it's good. I really don't care--I'm not changing this opening. In the paper I'm going to be showing what guilt is, how people respond to it, the difference between guilt and guilty fear or shame and the consequent reactions. Or how it--what it leads to possibly. So I'm going to open up with something like: "I really should have written this paper sooner. I hope that"--maybe I could do something to make that point. Or better than that would be my not going to class which is

> a self-destructive thing--and then saying that I hope my teacher doesn't find out and put it on my records forever. No, better than that--the second question would be maybe I could do two papers to make up for it and the last one will be well, maybe I won't go to class. And then I'll just show from this example which is not very clear, I know, but I'll make it clear, that this is the process of guilt, this is how guilt works, this is the result of guilt. And if I find it doesn't work, I'll switch it, but that's what I'm going with right now.

This last part of the tape captures "pre-writing" revision, illustrates the back and forth shaping and revising, the new possibilities being generated from the old. So much for the linear model of composing--first one thinks, then one writes, then one rewrites, then one stops.

As it turned out, of the six papers Lisa wrote for the course, the guilt paper was the least fully realized, the one not quite finished, not yet reader-based. The particular task--which Lisa essentially decided upon herself--was too complex; there was not enough time for her to assimilate the sophisticated texts on guilt, to digest them and to synthesize for readers. But certainly Lisa's attempt served her well. Old ideas become the context for new ones. During an interview several weeks later, Lisa was able to specify how she would revise her paper: she would write it for a different audience, change the opening to "Mary says" so that she could discuss her example more "logically." She would elaborate on guilty fear, distinguish between guilt and shame more precisely, give more examples.

Clearly, in school-sponsored writing, revision can begin as soon as the writing task is introduced and can continue beyond the "final" draft. Of course, students often need help in the initial shaping and reshaping of their topics, in sensing dissonance in their written drafts, and in figuring out how to resolve disharmonies.

Paul, the second student I studied, consistently needed quite a bit more help than Lisa. When he first entered the English class, he didn't revise at all. He made changes--he was a "good student" and felt he had to do something different in his second draft. But because his "intention" was limited to pleasing the teacher-examiner--and because he didn't know his new one--he had little to base his revisions on. Paul changed his attitude toward writing and toward himself as a writer during the course of the semester. While the transformation is the topic of another paper, suffice to say that he began to revise--to make purposive, if not always perfect--changes rather than recasting sentences in an uninformed groping to improve. Some revisions were self-initiated; many were prompted by peer group and teacher.

For his third paper, Paul received the most important help from his peers--particularly Robert. His assignment, an investigative paper, required him to engage in primary research--to interview, describe, and analyze. Paul chose to do his paper on the attitudes of foreign students living in the United States. Entering the investigation with one hypothesis--foreign students are thrilled to be in the U.S., he left with a quite different one--foreign students will be much happier when their stay in the United States is over. During the actual interviews, Paul

hadn't realized the extent of their displeasure. "It wasn't until after I was reading their quotes, three or four or five times, that it hit me. That it was really negative."

Before Paul started to write, he reported-in his discoveries. He talked about how enlightening the interviewing was for him, how his preconceptions turned out to be totally inaccurate. He had thought the students would be excited, especially because they were living in New York with all its opportunities. He explained: "I mean, I was excited about being in New York, about coming here, and I'm just from the midwest. So I thought that everybody must be."

Interestingly, while Paul could report-in his revised view of foreign students attitudes, he could not write an introduction that reflected his new knowledge. He had assimilated the new information--could talk it out--but couldn't shape it for a reader. In fact, the paper that he brought to his peer group had an introduction that would have been appropriate for the paper that he had originally intended to write--and had no conclusion at all. Paul had, however, managed to scribble a few concluding lines just before the peer group met--and read the un-xeroxed lines to the group. These concluding lines were:

> Talking with these students, I couldn't help feeling that they felt bitter towards the United States. Expecially Miss Papadapolis. I wonder if this is a result of having tackled all these cultural differences? If so, who is responsibile for these students having such hostile feelings?

Robert liked the idea of this ending and urged Paul to emphasize the students' hostile feelings throughout the paper. Paul responded by telling the group the story of his investigative process. Although he knew his introduction reflected his initial positive view, he wasn't sure if he had to change it. But he did know the right question to ask: "Should I go right from the beginning?"

Robert was listening attentively. He told Paul: "Write what you're saying now. 'I went into it thinking they would be happy, but for these reasons, and you say a reason, it is evident....'"

Helped by the opportunity to talk out his experience and to listen to his words paraphrased, Paul was eventually able to shape in writing his recently discovered intentions. Although his second draft introduction was wordy and awkward, his final draft was both appropriate and stylisticallv polished.

I'd like to return to the question of when student writers revise, when their composing processes are most similar to those of experienced and professional writers. In terms of "placement" in the entire composing process, students begin to revise as early as moments after the writing task is introduced and continue to revise even after their "final" draft is completed. In terms of the larger "enabling environment," students revise

—when they have a major role in defining their topics

--when tentative efforts are the norm

--when they have opportunities to share their drafts and talk out their ideas with peers and teachers--at all stages of the writing process

--and equally if not more important, when they have time.

Then, students will begin to take the risks inherent in involved writing. Then students will press to define and redefine their own intentions and have the tenacity to shape them for readers.

Appendix

Guiding Questions:

1. What are the writers' attitudes about writing and revising?
2. What do the writers bring with them to the specific writing tasks?
3. When do the writers revise?
   - initial conception and incubation (pre-writing)
   - the writing of the first draft (in-progress changes)
   - from first to second draft (after aid of a peer group)
   - from second to third draft (after written teacher comments)
4. What is the effect of their changes?
5. What part do their classmates, teacher, friends and relatives play in their composing process? Are there marked differences when the writer has no feedback?
6. Do the writers' composing-revising processes vary with writing function: transactional, expressive, poetic? Are there other criteria that cause the processes to vary?

Pedagogy and Research Design:

1. The writing task introduced
   (reporting-in before beginning to write)
2. First draft writing
   (reporting-in during break-times and after completing drafts)
3. Peer group interchange
   (tape recorded)
4. Second draft writing
   (reporting-in before and after writing)
5. Effect of teacher comments and third draft writing
   (reporting-in before and after writing)
6. The product
   (interview)

Reporting-In

First Draft

1. Before you begin to write, talk about what you intend to do in your paper. Mention how long you have been considering your ideas, whether or not this is a new topic for you.

2. When you want to take a rest, talk about what you've done so far, how you've done it, whether or not you expected to end up with the paper you see in front of you (i.e. were there any surprises?).

Second Draft

1. Before you begin to write, talk about the reaction of your peer group. Mention the kinds of comments/suggestions that particular students offered. Note your opinion of these suggestions.

2. During/after revising the draft, talk about your satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the changes that you've made.

Final Draft

1. Before you begin to write, read aloud the comments I have written on your paper. Let me know which ones you agree with, which you disagree with. (How do you feel, by the way?)

2. During/after revising, talk about the degree to which you've succeeded in solving the revision problems.

P.S. More is better than less here, so don't worry about being overly chatty.

Interview Questions for Each Paper

1. How did you decide on your topic? Was it the first one you considered? Had you ever thought of this topic as something you might write about before?

2. After deciding on your topic, did you spend a lot of time thinking before writing? Did you take preliminary notes, talk to anybody?

3. Did you write the paper straight through?

4. How did the peer group react?

5. Read my comments aloud and respond to them--how you felt when you first read them if you didn't report-in, and how you feel now.

6. Are you satisfied with the piece? Would you want to revise further?

7. Did your original intention change from beginning to end?